

Remarks on Gun Violence in Denver, Colorado

April 3, 2013

Everybody, please have a seat. Thank you. Well, it is wonderful to be back in Colorado. It is wonderful to be back in Denver. I want to thank Chief White for that introduction. You've got some outstanding elected officials who are here today, and I want to acknowledge them. First of all, a wonderful Governor, John Hickenlooper is here. He's here somewhere. I know, because I just talked to him. *[Laughter]* There he is. Next to him, an outstanding Lieutenant Governor, Joe Garcia. One of the finest young Senators in the country, Michael Bennet is here. Terrific Members of the House of Representatives: Ed Perlmutter and Diana DeGette. And your own mayor, Michael Hancock, is here.

I want to say thank you to the Denver Police for having me here, more importantly, for the outstanding work that all of you do each and every day to serve your communities and protect your citizens.

Before I came out here, I had a chance to sit down with some local law enforcement, Attorney General Holder, and some of the leaders I just mentioned, the wonderful mayor of Aurora who's here, and sportsmen, parents, loved ones of the victims of the shootings in Columbine and Aurora. And we talked about what we can do to protect more of our citizens from gun violence.

And from the beginning of this effort, we've wanted law enforcement front and center in shaping this discussion and the reforms that emerge from it, because law enforcement lives this every day. Law enforcement are the first to see the terrible consequences of any kind of violence, certainly gun violence: lives lost, families broken, communities that are changed forever. They're very often in the line of fire. The law enforcement knows what works and what doesn't, and so we wanted that experience and that advice.

And it was also important for us to hear from mayors like Steve Hogan, because he's been on the frontlines having to deal with these issues, under incredibly sad circumstances. And I've come to Denver today in particular because Colorado is proving a model of what's possible.

It's now been just over 100 days since the murder of 20 innocent children and 6 brave educators in Newtown, Connecticut, an event that shocked this country and, I think, galvanized parents all across the country to say, we've got to do something more to protect our kids. But consider this: Over those 100 days or so, more than 100 times as many Americans have fallen victim to gun violence. More than 2,000 of our fellow citizens, struck down, often because they were just going about their daily round. They weren't doing anything special. Just doing what folks do every day: shopping, going to school. Every day that we wait to do something about it, even more of our fellow citizens are stolen from our lives by a bullet from a gun.

Now, the good news is, Colorado has already chosen to do something about it. Look, this is a State that has suffered the tragedy of two of the worst mass shootings in our history: 14 years ago this month in Columbine and just last year in Aurora. But this is also a State that treasures its Second Amendment rights, the State of proud hunters and sportsmen. And by the way, the Governor wanted me to remind everybody that there is outstanding elk hunting here in Colorado. *[Laughter]* There's a strong tradition of gun ownership that's handed down from

generation to generation, and it's part of the fabric of people's lives. And they treat gun ownership with reverence and respect.

And so I'm here because I believe there doesn't have to be a conflict in reconciling these realities. There doesn't have to be a conflict between protecting our citizens and protecting our Second Amendment rights. I've got stacks of letters in my office from proud gun owners, whether they're for sport or protection or collection, who tell me how deeply they cherish their rights, don't want them infringed upon, but they still want us to do something to stop the epidemic of gun violence. And I appreciate every one of those letters. And I've learned from them.

And I think that Colorado has shown that practical progress is possible thanks to the leadership of wonderful Governor Hickenlooper and some of the State legislators who are here today. When I was talking to Steve, he mentioned that Aurora is very much a purple city. It's got a majority Republican city council; a majority of the State legislators are Democrat. But they came together understanding that out of this tragedy, there had to be something that made sense. And so we've seen enacted tougher background checks that won't infringe on the rights of responsible gun owners, but will help keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people.

Now, in January, just a few weeks after Newtown, I put forward a series of commonsense proposals along the same lines as what's passed here in Colorado to reduce gun violence and keep our kids safe. In my State of the Union Address, I urged Congress to give these proposals a vote. And by the way, before we even asked for a vote, I had already signed numerous Executive orders doing what we could administratively to make sure that guns don't fall into the hands of the wrong people.

But what I said then is still true: If we're really going to tackle this problem seriously, then we've got to get Congress to take the next step. And as soon as next week, they will be voting. As soon as next week, every Senator will get to vote on whether or not we should require background checks for anyone who wants to purchase a gun.

Now, some say, well, we already have background checks. And they're right. Over the past 20 years, those background checks have kept more than 2 million dangerous people from buying a gun. But the loopholes that currently exist in the law have allowed way too many criminals and folks who shouldn't be getting guns, it's allowed them to avoid background checks entirely. That makes it harder for law enforcement to do its job. It's not safe. It's not smart. And by the way, it's not fair to responsible gun owners who are playing by the rules.

Now, understand, nobody is talking about creating an entirely new system. We are simply talking about plugging holes, sealing a porous system that isn't working as well as it should. If you want to buy a gun, whether it's from a licensed dealer or a private seller, you should at least have to pass a background check to show you're not a criminal or someone legally prohibited from buying one. And that's just common sense.

During our roundtable discussion, Governor Hickenlooper, I know, was in the midst of this passionate debate about the legislation here in Colorado, and some people said, well, background checks aren't going to stop everybody. And the Governor was the first one to acknowledge, yes, they won't stop everybody, but as he pointed out, statistically, there are a whole bunch of folks who have been stopped.

As a consequence of background checks, law enforcement has been able to stop people who had been convicted of murder from getting a gun, people who are under restraining orders for having committed violent domestic abuse from getting a gun. In a couple of cases—

the Governor mentioned to me—law enforcement has actually been able to arrest people who came to pick up their gun—[laughter]—because they were criminals, wanted.

So this does work. And by the way, if you're selling a gun, wouldn't you want to know who you're selling it to? Wouldn't you want to know? Wouldn't you want in your conscience to know that the person you're selling to isn't going to commit a crime?

So these enhanced background checks won't stop all gun crimes, but they will certainly help prevent some. This is common sense. And by the way, most gun owners—more than 80 percent—agree this makes sense. More than 70 percent of NRA members agree. Ninety percent of the American people agree. So there's no reason we can't do this unless politics is getting in the way. There's no reason we can't do this.

As soon as next week, every Senator will get a chance to vote on a proposal to help strengthen school safety and help people struggling with mental health problems get the treatment that they need.

As soon as next week, every Senator will get to vote on whether or not we should crack down on folks who buy guns as part of a scheme to arm criminals. That would keep more guns off the streets and out of the hands of people who are intent on doing harm. And it would make life a whole lot easier and safer for the people behind me, police officers.

Every Senator will get a say on whether or not we should keep weapons of war and high-capacity ammunition magazines that facilitate mass killings off our streets. The type of assault rifle used in Aurora, for example, when paired with a high-capacity magazine, has one purpose: to pump out as many bullets as possible, as fast as possible. It's what allowed that gunman to shoot 70 people and kill 12 in a matter of a few minutes. I don't believe that weapons designed for theaters of war have a place in movie theaters. Most Americans agree with that.

Most of these ideas are not controversial. Right now 90 percent of Americans—90 percent—support background checks that will keep criminals and people who have been found to be a danger to themselves or others from buying a gun. More than 80 percent of Republicans agree. Most gun owners agree. Think about it: How often do 90 percent of Americans agree on anything? [Laughter]

And yet there are already some Senators back in Washington floating the idea that they might use obscure procedural stunts to prevent or delay any of these votes on reform. Think about that. They're not just saying they'll vote no on the proposal that most Americans support. They're saying they'll do everything they can to avoid even allowing a vote on a proposal that the overwhelming majority of the American people support. They're saying your opinion doesn't matter.

Now, we knew from the beginning that change wouldn't be easy. And we knew that there would be powerful voices that would do everything they could to run out the clock, change the subject, ignore the majority of the American people. We knew they'd try to make any progress collapse under the weight of fear and frustration, or maybe people would just stop paying attention.

The only way this time will be different is if the American people demand that this time it must be different, that this time we must do something to protect our communities and our kids. We need parents, we need teachers, we need police officers, we need pastors, we need hunters and sportsmen—Americans of every background—to say, we've suffered too much pain and care too much about our children to allow this continue. We're not going to just wait

for the next Newtown or the next Aurora before we act. And I genuinely believe that's what the overwhelming majority of Americans—I don't care what party they belong to—that's what they want. They just want to see some progress.

It was interesting, during the conversation, a number of people had talked about the trust issue. Part of the reason it's so hard to get this done is because both sides of the debate sometimes don't listen to each other. The people who take absolute positions on these issues, on both sides, sometimes aren't willing to concede even an inch of ground.

And so one of the questions we talked about was, how do you build trust? How do you rebuild some trust? And I told the story about two conversations I had. The first conversation was when Michelle came back from doing some campaigning out in rural Iowa. And we were sitting at dinner, and she had been to a big county, a lot of driving out there, a lot of farmland. And she said, you know, if I was living out in a farm in Iowa, I'd probably want a gun too. If somebody just drives up into your driveway, and you're not home, you don't know who these people are, and you don't know how long it's going to take for the sheriffs to respond. I can see why you'd want some guns for protection. That's one conversation.

I had another conversation just a couple of months ago with a mom from Chicago—actually, Evanston, Illinois—whose son had been killed in a random shooting. And she said, you know, I hate it when people tell me that my son was shot because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was in the right place. He was on his way to school. He wasn't in the wrong place. He was exactly where he was supposed to be.

Now, both those things are true. And sometimes, we're so divided between rural and urban, and folks whose hunting is part of their lives and folks whose only experience with guns is street crime. And the two sides just talk past one another. And more than anything, what I want to just emphasize is, there are good people on both sides of this thing, but we have to be able to put ourselves in the other person's shoes. If you're a hunter, if you're a sportsman, if you have a gun in your house for protection, you've got to understand what it feels like for that mom whose son was randomly shot.

And if you live in an urban area and you're worried about street crime, you've got to understand what it might be like if you grew out on a ranch and your dad had been taking you hunting all your life. And we had a couple of sportsmen in our conversation today, and I thought one of them said something very important. He said, all my experiences with guns have been positive, but I realize that for others, all their experiences about guns have been negative. Well, that's a start, right? If we start listening to each other, then we should be able to get something done that's constructive. We should be able to get that done.

Now, one last thing I'm going to mention is that during this conversation—I hope you don't mind me quoting you, Joe—Joe Garcia, I thought, also made an important point, and that is that the opponents of some of these —commonsense laws have ginned up fears among responsible gun owners that have nothing to do with what's being proposed, nothing to do with the facts, but feeds into this suspicion about government.

You hear some of these quotes: I need a gun to protect myself from the government. We can't do background checks because the government is going to come take my guns away.

Well, the government is us. These officials are elected by you. They are elected by you. I am elected by you. I am constrained, as they are constrained, by a system that our Founders put in place. It's a government of and by and for the people.

And so, surely, we can have a debate that's not based on the notion somehow that your elected representatives are trying to do something to you other than potentially prevent another group of families from grieving the way the families of Aurora or Newtown or Columbine have grieved. So we've got to get past some of the rhetoric that gets perpetuated that breaks down trust and is so over the top that it just shuts down all discussion. And it's important for all of us when we hear that kind of talk to say, hold on a second. If there are any folks who are out there right now who are gun owners, and you've been hearing that somehow somebody is taking away your guns, get the facts. —We're not proposing a gun registration system, we're proposing background checks for criminals.

Don't just listen to what some advocates or folks who have an interest in this thing are saying. Look at the actual legislation. That's what happened here in Colorado. And hopefully, if we know the facts and we're listening to each other, then we can actually move forward.

And that's what Members of Congress need to hear from you. Right now Members of Congress are home in their districts. Many of them are holding events where they can hear from their constituents. So I'm asking anyone out there who is listening today, find out where your Member of Congress stands on these issues. If they're not part of the 90 percent of Americans who agree on background checks, then ask them why not. Why wouldn't you want to make it more difficult for a dangerous criminal to get his or her hands on a gun? Why wouldn't you want to close the loophole that allows too many criminals to buy a gun without even the simplest of background checks? Why on Earth wouldn't you want to make it easier rather than harder for law enforcement to do their job?

I know that some of the officers here today know what it's like to look into the eyes of a parent or a grandparent, a brother or a sister, or a spouse who has just lost a loved one to an act of violence. Some of those families, by the way, are here today. And as police officers, you know as well as anybody, there is no magic solution to prevent every bad thing from happening in the world. You still suit up, you put on your badge, put yourself at risk every single day. Every single day, you go to work, and you try to do the best you can to protect the people you're sworn to protect and serve. Well, how can the rest of us as citizens do anything less?

If there is just one step we can take to prevent more Americans from knowing the pain that some of the families who are here have known, don't we have an obligation to try? Don't we have an obligation to try? If these reforms keep one person from murdering dozens of innocent children or worshippers or moviegoers in a span of minutes, isn't it worth fighting for? I believe it is. That's why I'm going to keep on working. I'm going to keep on giving it my best efforts. But I'm going to need your help.

This is not easy. And I'll be blunt: A lot of Members of Congress, this is tough for them. Because those who are opposed to any form of legislation affecting guns, they're very well organized; they're very well financed. But it can be done if enough voices are heard.

So I want to thank all the police officers who are here for giving their best efforts every single day. I want to thank Governor Hickenlooper for his outstanding leadership. I want to thank all the families who are here for your courage in being willing to take out of this tragedy something positive. I want to thank the people of Colorado for coming together in sensible ways. Let's see if we can get the whole country to do so.

Thank you, Denver. God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:19 p.m. at the Denver Police Academy. In his remarks, he referred to Robert C. White, chief of police, Denver, CO; and Mayor Steven Hogan of Aurora, CO; James E. Holmes, accused gunman in the July 20 shootings at the Century 16 multiplex in Aurora, CO.

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